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ABSTRACT

To describe a cross-curriculum writing model designed for a middle school, this paper provides a condensed script of what the designer of the program said and did during its first year to steer the program in a productive direction. The paper is written in the form of exerpts from relevant conversations. The first conversation relates how the idea was introduced to all the teachers by a team comprised of teachers from all subject areas, and how the idea of school-wide journal keeping was explained to teachers meeting in smaller groups. The second conversation reveals how teachers used response journals in the classroom to reinforce what students had learned during the class period. The third conversation explains how students could use their journals to annotate and relate their learning by writing summary paragraphs speculating on what their learning will mean to them at a later time. The paper concludes that because of the program all the students at the school are writing, even those whose grasp of English is only tenuous, and students' reading comprehension has improved. (SRT)

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Facilitating Writing: A Staff Development Model for the Secondary Schools

by
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There were several caveats which I had to overcome when I began to design a cross-curriculum writing model for an overcrowded year-round middle school where most of the students were of Hispanic background and many were still at the developmental stage of language acquisition. As a former English Department Chairperson, both at a highly academically oriented high school and at a high school in transition with a mixture of ethnic and socio-economic groups, I knew that my task would not be easy. I had stopped counting the times at both schools when I would be stopped in the hallways and asked why the English department had failed to teach the outline or how to answer questions in complete sentences or "the research paper." I knew that teachers of other disciplines refused to view themselves as teachers of language. If I were to suggest that they be teachers of writing, I would, at the least severe, be chastised for trying to pass off what is viewed as my job to them. Therefore I did not arrive at the middle school without knowledge of the difficulties I would have to surmount.

What follows is a condensed script of what I said and did during the first year of this program--a script with asides that will not be found in this paper, but will, however be enlightening.

A conversation between the principal and the college intern supervisor:

-Our writing scores on the AB65 tests are not as high as I would like them to be. I know that our English teachers are giving many writing assignments and that they are teaching writing as a process and that, within the scope of their own department, they are successful. We have to do more with other departments, but the English department chair says that she is powerless when it comes to convincing other academic disciplines that writing is important in their classes too. You are a former English department chairperson. What do you suggest?

-First, I think that you need to realize that each teacher of a discipline thinks his/her subject is of greatest importance to the students being taught. Therefore what you need is not a teacher from one discipline telling another what is needed, you need a team from all the disciplines to set up this program. And

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that team must have as its captain someone on the master salary schedule, i.e. an administrator. The other requirement is that there must be an "outsider," someone not connected with the school or the district, not known as a teacher of writing, who can be your emanuensis (sic).

-Our team is together and waiting for your input. How do we begin?

-Let's start with a school-wide journal keeping, but with the specific requirement that the journal be a place for the students to record "what I learned about today" in a least one complete sentence. Since you ask that all your teachers have agendas either on transparencies or on the chalk board for each class and that the agenda contain the day's objective, students should be able to spend the last five minutes of the period reviewing and recording what he/she learned. Although I believe that response journals which we are beginning should not be taken from the classroom, maybe we should make that a teacher based option. During the last few moments of class students will have something to do besides "pack up" and be sure that the area around their seats is "free of litter."

-Teachers will want to know how they should GRADE these responses. They will feel that this is an extra burden and many will respond by arguing against anything more to evaluate.

-Response journals are not for grading per se. They can have many uses. If the class uses cooperative groups, review sentences can be shared and used for test review prior to a formal assessment. There are many other things we will be using the response journal for. Right now, though, let's try to get every student in every class to have a place to record his/her sentence on "what I learned today" based on the daily objective.

-How should this message be given to the teachers?

-Instead of a formal faculty meeting, have a meeting by departments or by conference periods to explain the program and to disseminate an example which I hope that we will write here today.

AND THEY DID

TWO WEEKS LATER

-How much flak have you been taking for the response journal since I was last on campus?

-None, really. Except for my chronic complainers, who never have anything good to say, everyone seems to think that at the least the students are on task more of the period. One of the science teachers is using the response the next day by having a student read his/her response and connect it with what the

objective for the day is. Another teacher has asked to have two different responses, one at the beginning of the period and one at the end. I don't know how to handle that one.

-It could be that he/she has sustained silent reading and wants the students to record what they have read about in one part of the journal and then use the review sentence about the actual lesson at the end. If it's something else, I'll be glad to talk with her/him. Maybe it will be a new direction that we can all take.

-Also the social studies teachers have been talking about an in-service that some of them had when they were off-track...something about a dialectic. Do you know anything about that?

-That's an excellent way for students to codify their ideas as well as to question certain parts of the text. Although it is being touted as a critical thinking skill, I believe that it really is <u>schema</u> theory at work. Students comment and/or ask questions on a sheet of paper which stands for the margin of a text. You know, what you and I did in college when we read the textbooks that we weren't going to be selling back after the class was over. I clutter up some of my books so much that I've gone to using post-it notes as well as writing in the margin and highlighting.

-What are you going to have for us at the next meeting of our team? I know that you have something up your sleeve from the gleam in your eye?

-I want to begin to work with summary writing in all the disciplines and I want to use those review sentences as the basis for summarizing units either as a study technique or testing or just as intermediate assignment to see if the students are grasping the main ideas of the lessons. I also think that many of the teachers are suspicious that their students are not thinking about what they are recording at the end of class, but just are writing the class objective in sentence form. I'd like to give the team some options to overcome this. We could add prediction to the responses...this is what I learned today and therefore I think that I will be learning that tomorrow. What we would be setting up is a primitive anticipation guide which can be modified at the end of the lesson to mirror what was actually taught. Teachers might even give extra credit to students who are correct.

-I won't be able to be at this meeting; I've got to be downtown on an interview committee. Good Luck!

LATER Expletives deleted!!!!

-I think that I went too fast, gave too much at that meeting you missed. I tried to deal with an article from the <u>English</u>

Journal entitled "Guidelines for Writing Assignments in the Content Areas" and I introduced Roots in the Sawdust. Maybe we aren't quite ready for longer writing assignments, admits, and dialogue journals. Let's try to get "glossing" into the journal next as a sophisticated form of summary.

-Remember, I'm not a former English or reading teacher. Stop with the foreign phrases.

-What I'm suggesting is that the students use their journals to annotate and relate their learning. Perhaps twice a week, they could write a paragraph of summary and then speculate on what meaning what they are learning about might have for them at a later time. This could happen after a small or large group discussion, or could even be given as a homework assignment. And I'll have to miss the next two team meetings.

LATER

-I asked the team members to write you about our program instead of my asking questions and trying to implement more writing assignments. I read these over and I think that you will be delighted with what you will find.

And I was.

We have expanded our journal program and now the students write at length at least twice a week in each academic class and once a week in even P.E. Many of them are keeping personal journals; the only way we know this is that some have been found in the lunch yard and on the buses. Now we wait for the scores, but even if the scores don't rise appreciably, we have been successful. All the students at the school are writing, even those whose grasp of English is tenuous at best. E.S.L. teachers have been our greatest supporters. We are now looking at the problem of oracy with second language students and finding that all this work in writing has improved their oral skills also. And one more improvement that only I had hoped for, the students are reading with greater comprehension according to their classroom teachers.

Soon they will begin to work on writing specific curriculum for each subject so that new teachers coming to the school (as they do in groups of ten or more each year) will have a foundation to continue to use writing assignments as learning activities. I wish that I could be around to help with that, but I have had to loosen my ties because of other university responsibilities. I'll keep in touch through my friends at the school, but I think that this school is ready to strike out on its own. I left the principal another article from The English Journal, "Another Job for English Teachers: Showing Colleagues How to Teach Writing" and a publication from The Council for Basic Education, Writing to Learn. I'll be checking on them soon.